

Reaching across party lines to end modern-day slavery

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By Zoe Lofgren and Dan Lungren

They are age-old stories. Women brought to the Bay Area from China with false promises of life in a far-off land, only to be trapped in prostitution. Latino men laboring in debt bondage on ranches and farms in inland valleys. These stories may be redolent of the Gold Rush and frontier days, but in fact are situations that have been uncovered in present-day California. Some call it human trafficking, perhaps to make the crime less disturbing to confront. We call it modern slavery. It must be stopped.

Especially in the past decade, federal criminal civil rights prosecutions have uncovered cases of enslavement across the country. The litany of cases goes on and on, each one equally tragic: Mexican women forced to serve up to 50 men each day in dingy brothels in New York; African teenagers held in servitude as nannies in Washington, D.C.; American women and girls lured onto the streets with promises of love and glamour only to be held in prostitution through coercive force; African-American men laboring in orange groves of Florida trapped by drug addiction and "company-store" debts; Asian workers trapped in sweatshop garment factories in American Samoa and Saipan; Honduran women forced to drink and dance with clients in dance halls in Texas; and mentally ill white Americans forced to work on a Kansas farm.

From the beginning, the promise of freedom enshrined in the 13th Amendment has protected everyone in the United States, whether African-Americans, Latinos, Asians or Europeans.

Slavery might seem like a closed chapter in our nation's history, but it is worth remembering that the civil rights movement was only possible after the NAACP and the FBI worked together during the Roosevelt administration to dismantle the system of sharecropping and peonage in the American south.

Even today, farmworker advocates routinely have to fight against enslavement in the fields before they can address other concerns that the migrant community faces. Asian-American community activists and legal service providers have built their efforts upon the successful liberation of workers from the notorious El Monte sweatshop more than a decade ago.

The Constitution's promise of freedom is written in the suffering of all of those who have been held in bondage. As a country we owe it to them to never stop fighting against servitude and slavery.

This week, the House of Representatives will consider a bill that we are co-sponsoring to update our anti-slavery statutes, the William Wilberforce Act. Named in honor of the famous English legislator who fought the transatlantic slave trade in the 19th century, the proposed law will provide new tools to protect against modern slavery. The law will protect people in the United States, both in the immigrant community and among American citizens, and will provide foreign aid and diplomatic tools to combat slavery and trafficking overseas as well.

The Wilberforce Act protects workers, ensures compassionate immigration treatment for children, and allows for the reunification of victims and their families. The bill delivers on the promise of freedom by creating tough new enforcement tools to punish exploitation, whether by unscrupulous labor recruiters, diplomats who abuse their servants or brutal pimps.

The bill provides resources so that non-governmental organizations, federal and local law enforcement and the faith community can work together to liberate victims and bring their traffickers to justice. In our congressional districts - in the South Bay and Sacramento - such interdisciplinary task forces have begun the important work of implementing state and federal anti-trafficking statutes. The Wilberforce Act will allow them to intensify their efforts.

There are some who feel that there is no room for bipartisanship in Washington. Some say that the political parties are so far apart as to preclude any cooperation at all, especially on legislation that combines compassionate and pragmatic immigration solutions with tough law enforcement standards. The Wilberforce Act disproves that notion. We will continue to work together to ensure that no one is held in bondage in California or elsewhere.

Coretta Scott King once said "Freedom is never really won - you earn it and win it in every generation." We are proud that the California congressional delegation can come together across party lines to lead

the fight to guarantee the constitutional promise of liberty for all.

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